

Should Students Be on a First-Name Basis with Their Professors?

As the new school year quickly approaches, college freshmen will soon learn the proper way to address their new instructors. No longer are the go-to titles of “Mr.” and “Ms.” commonly used like they are for K-12 teachers; rather, “Professor,” “Doctor,” and first names are thrown in.

The pertinent question today asks whether it’s okay to address college professor by their first name. Or should students use the more formal titles of Professor or Doctor? And what if the instructor does not have a PhD or is simply a graduate student?

The question of the title seems to depend on the culture of the college campus.

At my university, most professors are known only by their first names, with the exception of a select few. At my fellow interns’ schools—Benedictine, St. Olaf, and Creighton—students are asked to always place a title before their professors’ last name. My colleagues were stunned when I asked them if they called their professors by their first name. Another coworker of mine said he only addressed his mentor by first name, and that the first name address only happened after working together for several years.

Without exception my peers said they would feel uncomfortable if they started calling their professors by their first names. But why? By calling a majority of my professors by their first name and some by just their last, has my school broken some unwritten code of conduct or [decorum](#)?

Dr. Ted Vokes, an adjunct faculty member in psychology at the

University of Windsor, says that he understands how addressing professors appropriately is unclear to students:

“Not all professors are doctors . . . and not all doctors who teach are professors I’m sessional, but because I’ve been made an adjunct, both are accurate. Then, of course, senior graduate students who teach are neither, and ‘Mr.’ or ‘Ms.’ is appropriate.” It’s confusing, but that also means that, when you get it right, your professors will both notice and appreciate your time and effort in addressing them correctly.”

Professor Katrina Gulliver of the University of New South Wales [calls this](#) an “epidemic of familiarity.”

I am not your friend; I am not “Miss,” she wrote in an Inside Higher Ed article. “I’ve always been of the view that I don’t want to undermine my own authority in the classroom by dressing like the students, inviting them to use my first name, or making any other gestures towards ‘being down with the kids.’”

Does informality breed disrespect?

[Professor Shima Baradaran Baughman](#), a University of Utah College of Law professor, said she believes some professors prefer to be called by their first names because it makes students more comfortable. But in [a recent blog post](#), Baughman said the practice may encourage a familiarity that is getting a little out of hand, noting her students now regularly arrive to class, snack during instruction, and wear pajamas in the classroom.

“I worry that students have an extremely casual view of their professors, and calling them by their first names may be exacerbating what I think is an already bigger issue of casual

millennials and respect," [she wrote](#).

Personally, I like being able to call my professors by their first names. It makes them seem more accessible and friendly. I also believe that students are more willing to attend office hours and ask for help if they feel comfortable with their instructors. It stands to reason that this additional tutoring could lead to better academic performance for students.

Because of the campus culture and informality to which I have been accustomed, I don't believe this crosses a line of decorum. But many people would disagree with me. By being friends with one's professor, some could see it as crossing a line and possibly as an opportunity for inappropriate relationships to begin.

Just as higher education is often a topic of hot discussion, this topic too will likely continue to be debated among colleges.

How do you think college professors should be addressed? By which title did you address your professor? Have higher education titles changed over the years? If so, why?

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[Image credit: [Campus Riot](#)]